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IDEAS

A chat with spydom's former chief

Ethical level of CIA falls short of public expectations, he says

By Louise Sweeney
Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

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BOOKS
INTERVIEW

WE are sitting in a clandestine back booth of the Palm Restaurant, where Stansfield Turner, former director of central intelligence, is talking about the etiquette of bugging:

"I have a nervous habit when I wear cuff links. Sometimes I fiddle with the snap on the back of the cuff links," he begins. He remembers as head of the Central Intelligence Agency sitting in the Paris office of a French contact fiddling with the back of one of the blue cuff links he was wearing. "Suddenly I saw his eyes *riveted* on this cuff link. And I'm sure he felt this oval blue cuff link was a microphone and that I was turning it on and off."

In the world of spydom, mutual trust could be shattered by just such a breach of confidence. So Admiral Turner carefully dropped his hands, the Frenchman then dropped his guard, and the talk continued sans intrigue.

Turner doesn't tell that story in his new book, "Secrecy and Democracy: The CIA in Transition," but he does tell several others that offer an illuminating glimpse into the inner workings of the CIA at a crucial time in its history. The book is also a riveting but subjective account of his stewardship, which critics claimed weakenend the agency.

Over a plate of chicken salad, Turner talks shop. He talks about a 36-hour war that started June 18, 1954, in Guatemala and that served as a controversial model for further forays by the CIA. The war was won by a broadcast ploy: A CIA radio station, camouflaged as a rebels' station, broadcast word that anticommunist Col. Carlos Armas had invaded Guatemala from Honduras with 5,000 men and was sweeping like General Grant toward the capital in a "people's rebellion." In reality, Armas had an "army" of 200 bedraggled men plus a few old aircraft and mercenaries. The mock-rebel radio station continued broadcasting frequent bulletins about the army's mythic march and a single bomb dropped on a parade field in the capital. Communist-leaning President Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán resigned a day and a half later, while Colonel Armas was still outside the city.

Admiral Turner ticks off several covert operations like this, some successful, some unsuccessful. In his book he defends covert action against criticism that it is not moral, arguing, "These seem to me to be flawed attempts to transform an idealized view of morality between individuals to a standard of morality between nations." He notes, too, that the CIA tried covert action in Indonesia and the Philippines, maybe other places, that didn't work. "And now they've tried Nicaragua," he says. "And it didn't work. As I try to say in the book, there are limited circumstances in which all the factors will come into play, so that it's possible to finesse someone out of his government." Speaking of the CIA today he says, "They get off the track when they think it's a lot easier than it is, like Nicaragua."

Turner had commanded a destroyer, a minesweeper, and the whole US Second Fleet, but he balked when he was first asked to head up the CIA. A US Naval Academy graduate and Rhodes scholar, he was a military careerist who would have preferred to be chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

But when his President and former Annapolis classmate Jimmy Carter asked him to resign as commander of the southern flank of NATO to head the CIA, Turner saluted and did it. He took over at a dark time for the agency, after the 1975 Church Committee (appointed by Congress in the wake of Watergate revelations and press reports of CIA abuses) uncovered evidence that the agency had indeed spied on Americans. As a result, the public was deeply critical of the agency. Objectivity, legality, and restored reputation were the core of Turner's goals for the agency, he notes in his book.

Turner in his book stresses the importance of integrity and morality within the framework of the CIA. How does he assess current CIA director William J. Casey's handling of the agency in this area? "Well, I don't know whether it's Casey, whether it's Reagan, whether it's the White House, but I think that the mining of Nicaragua, the condoning of an assassination manual on Nicaragua, the shooting up of farmers' trucks going to market in Nicaragua, the [alleged] association with a unit — a Lebanese group that ended up truck-bombing 80 innocent people — are all actions that are below the ethical level that the American public wants to condone in the name of intelligence." (The CIA has denied any involvement in the bombing.)

At that point the waiter materializes, and Admiral Turner asks him to take away what's left of the chicken salad so he won't eat the rest of it. Self-control. He is a trim-looking man with a crest of silver hair, sea-blue eyes with a faint sailor's squint, and thick, iron-gray eyebrows that rival those of his mentor, Adm. Elmo Zumwalt.

There is no gold braid on his shoulder, but he looks like an officer and a gentleman in a tan summer suit,

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cream shirt with muted stripes, and brown paisley tie. Admiral Turner sits bolt upright on the blue-green leatherette banquette, as though he were reviewing the fleet. He does not look remotely like George Smiley, John le Carré's superspook, or Ian Fleming's James Bond or even Sidney Reilly, the dashing Edwardian hero of the PBS series "Reilly: Ace of Spies," which he admits he has a weakness for.

The admiral doesn't believe in the romance of spying. Of the heroes of le Carré, Fleming, and the American Charles McCarry — who writes thrillers about the CIA — Turner says: "They're awfully glamorized. One of the things I try to bring out in the book is that the real spying, the real risky work, is done by what we call agents," usually foreigners recruited to work for the CIA. "So the James Bond type of thing where he's always climbing into a castle or jumping out of airplanes, to the extent it's done at all, is usually done by somebody else, not by our CIA people. So there isn't that same thrill-kind-of-thing they would make you think."

Was it a thriller of a job, being head of the CIA?

No, it was mainly routine, he says. "You made these occasional decisions about something very risky." Most of the risks, however, were at a different level: "Were you interpreting the facts right? Were you operating the satellites right, so they'd see the right things? We only took half a dozen risks of human life, where if we made a decision, 'Yes, we'll do that,' somebody might get killed."

Did anyone get killed?

"Nope. They made it. Made it every time."

In his novel "The Honorable Schoolboy," John le Carré writes of the British intelligence service: "To every closed society there is an inside and an outside." Did Stansfield Turner, who was sharply attacked by some CIA insiders for being arrogant and insensitive in his personnel cuts, ever feel like an insider himself?

"I never became an insider in the sense that my initial reactions would be the same as a professional's," he says. "I happen to think that it's important to have that detachment at that particular time . . . , when change was necessary. . . ." Among the changes he made was giving more career opportunities to women at the CIA, "which had been a male bastion for years."

Turner wrote "Secrecy and Democracy" over a 2½-year period on a word processor, then found himself enmeshed for months with the CIA over its censorship of 100 passages. He says the agency was "arbitrary and arrogant" in its attitude, forcing him to delete even information already in print, including quotations from Jimmy Carter's books and Turner's own public speeches.

"I still support the review process; I'm very intent on keeping secrets," but the intelligence community itself should investigate and reform that process, he says.

He is about to dash off to his next interview but answers one final question, about whether he misses being king of spookdom: "Oh, yes, you do when a lot of things are going on in the world. You wish you knew the inside of what's happening . . . ," says the Washington insider who's now outside.